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ABSTRACT

The practice of student evaluation of college faculty is discussed in terms of the literature on social ritual. The following arguments that critics have raised are considered: student ratings of professors are neither scientific nor objective; feedback needed by professors to improve the quality of their work and data needed by administrators to make qualitative judgments about professors are not congruent; and records of the ratings become an instrument of social control inappropriate to higher education. It is suggested that the practice of student evaluations of teachers has been linked to student pressure for control and public pressure for accountability in past years. However, the campus atmosphere in the mid-1980s is not turbulent or rebellious and scholars have demonstrated that evaluations are not an integral part of the instructional process. Yet, the evaluations continue (i.e., the process is ritualized). Several factors that promote the ritual of student evaluations of faculty are discussed: the psychic payoff for almost all parties concerned (students, the administration, and the teacher); the increasing bureaucratization of the educational system; and the job security involved for the "staff development specialist." (SW)

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Opinion polling taken among students, who comment anonymously on their professors, is now an administratively required procedure on ninety percent of campuses in the United States (SREB 1977). These data are maintained in records which are used to "evaluate" the teaching performance of faculty. There is a large and growing body of literature on this practice, but it is largely in the domain of educationists who rarely discuss theoretical foundations, do not discuss the propriety of the practice, nor evaluate hypotheses of substantive theoretical value. Only recently have attempts been made to introduce sociological theory and methodology into "student evaluation of college faculty" and to explain it in terms of social phenomena (Whittington 1982).

Elsewhere, arguments have been made that:

1. In university settings where the scientific method is sacrosanct and objectivity is a valued norm, student ratings of professors are neither scientific nor objective.

2. Feedback needed by a professor to improve the quality of his or her work, and data needed by administrators to make qualitative judgments about professors, are not congruent.

3. Records of the ratings become an instrument of social control inappropriate to higher education (Whittington, 1983a).

It is a question for scholarship, then, to weigh the validity of the foregoing claims, and if substantial merit is found in them, to investigate the reasons which lie behind the fact that respected institutions of higher education continue to pursue a flawed policy. The purpose of this essay is to pursue these questions and to offer an explanation in terms of the literature on social ritual.

Scientific Processes

Accepted scientific investigation generally follows a path which posits a theory, articulates a hypothesis based on that theory, develops a methodology by which the hypothesis may be supported or falsified, and draws conclusions based on that empirical evidence. Student ratings are usually lists of human traits and the student is encouraged to chose among those which he or she feels applies to the target professor. This becomes a collection of subjective "scores" stemming from the component of naive psychology within the student rather than an object evaluation of teaching effectiveness or the professor's adherence to an official job description.

Despite the very great commitment to formal learning in this country, say David Morgan and his associates (1976), very little is known about what represents excellence in eucation. Although objective criteria for measuring excellence would be welcomed by would-be evaluators, no agreed upon method exists for determining quality in this manner.

Teaching effectiveness, as a concept to be quantified, must fall outside the domain of measurable entities. Travers (1981) has noted that the concept of teaching as an assembly of competencies lacks substance and has not led to

any defensible and usable set of criteria for judgment. The roads to truth are many and varied and the path need not be paved with numbers and mathematical formula. Why, then, asks Kossoff (1972) do educationists insist on forcing qualitative traits into a quantitative mold?

To attempt to evaluate the educational process, it is important foremost to determine the nature of overarching concepts. Emile Durkheim contributed to sociology the view that education is the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its very existence (Lukes, 1973:111). It consists of a systematic socialization of the young generation, and the aim of education is to constitute that system within individuals.

Elsewhere, Durkeim has defined education as the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life; the object of education is not to provide the student with a greater or lesser bits of data, but to create within him or her a deep-lying disposition, a kind of perspective of the soul (Giddens, 1972).

The educator must, Durkheim said, "help the younger generations to become conscious of the new ideal toward which they are moving confusedly. To orient them in that direction it is not enough for him to conserve the past; he must prepare him for the future" (Giddens, 1972:217). Asking the student to make a quantitative assessment of an instructor's role in such a socialization process seems somewhat akin to making the clay a judge of the potter.

In a later time, John Dewey (1916) noted that we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of environment; the student learns as much by the climate in which the

lesson is presented as by the excellence of the presentation itself.

Variables having to do with a student's learning in the classroom are many. Torsten Husen (1979), in reviewing a number of studies, noted that research consistently shows that social background and home conditions account for a larger portion of the between-student and between-school differences in cognitive outcomes than do school resources and teaching practices. Individuals will be affected differently by variables within the community, the college, the class sections, individuals within the section, the instructor, and constraints on the instructor. Additionally, as psychologists Arthur Couch and Kenneth Keniston (1960) point out, a central personality syndrome of the student may predispose him or her to score favorably or unfavorably, regardless of the question posed.

While correlations among rating items and constituent groups of students undoubtedly may be of value in specified research areas, to use anonymous ratings by students as a measure of the professional competence of an instructor, the literature and evidence demonstrate, should discourage the university from lowering its standards by granting any semblance of recognition to the routine process as "scientific."

Feedback

Inherent in the task of teaching is the necessity to know the extent to which the student is receiving and understanding the material the teacher is attempting to impart. The teacher therefore constantly must seek feedback, not only on the data transmitted but also upon the method and efficacy of the transmission.

In soliciting necessary feedback, the instructor deliberately seeks to locate weak points in his or her technique in order to optimize rapport and hence transmission of information. Professors learn about their classroom effectiveness both from what their students do and from what they say (Kulik, 1977:277).

When a third party -- the college administration -- becomes involved in soliciting information from the student about the instructor, the nature of the interaction changes. The administration becomes an intervening variable, and it is unrealistic, says Kulik, to expect much involvement when teachers are rated on forms created by someone else for someone else's purposes.

Sociologist Max Weber noted that the primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize "inconvenient facts," often a difficult and not necessarily a pleasant undertaking for the student (Weber, 1946:147). The student attempting to meet the teacher's demands is not necessarily an admirer of the one forcing this intrusion of inconvenience. Weber deemed the goal of education to be the quality of a person's bearing which was considered "cultivated," rather than in a specialized training for expertness.

"It is a fact," said Weber (p. 133) that whether or not the students flock to a teacher is determined in large measure, larger than one would believe possible, by purely external things: temperament and even the inflection of his voice. "After rather extensive experience and sober reflection, I have a deep distrust of courses that draw crowds, however unavoidable they may be."

In this day of formula funding, the sum of money a

public institution may receive from the taxpayers' treasury is dependent in large measure upon high enrollments per instructor. It is in the interest of the administration, therefore, to seek information about which professors are more likely to produce income. Rating forms, at least superficially, promise to give the administrative officers this profitable information.

Student opinion polls, however, reflect many variables not specified on the forms.

Social Control

Ted Vaughan (1979:276) says that an elementary fact of American education is that it has adopted the organizational pattern of the broader society -- bureaucracy. Because of the special nature of education, the principle of bureaucratic dominance has profound influence in shaping the character of education and knowledge.

Inherent in bureaucratic dominance is the use of records as a control device. One may know what is in one's own file, but knowledge of what is in another's dossier may amount to an invasion of privacy. The person in charge of the records, however, knows what is in everybody's files. When the files contain the results of student opinion polls (and labelled "evaluations"), the person in charge of the files is in a powerful position of social control.

Betty Raskin and Patricia Plante (1979:381) have suggested that to demand that faculty transcend the fears and pressures which student ratings place upon them, particularly in these days of budgetary constraints and retrenchment, is simply naive.

Going further, John McNeil (1981) says that to the extent that evaluation is judging, punishing, and controlling, it will produce anxiety.

Tracing the deveopment of education in America, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1979) cited an "educational efficiency binge" in the 1920s which led to the application of business management methods to schools. A concentration of decision-making power was placed in the hands of administrators. The quest for economic rationalization had the same disastrous consequences for teachers that bureaucracy and rationalization of production had on most other workers. The possibility of intimate or complicated classroom relationships gave way to the social relations of the production line.

Citing the "Disneyland effects" brought about by the student rating process, Leon Zelby (1974) believes it is possible to adapt one's teaching technique to obtain a good or bad evaluation and that a good evaluation may be associated with a teaching technique of lesser educational value than a poor evaluation. The current tendency to use these evaluations in a quantitative and formal sense changes the process from a helpful collection of information to a bureaucratic device that could become detrimental to education.

This somewhat parallels the view of Fritz Machlup (1979), who says that students cannot be judges of the content of what they are taught, and that what goes over well -- and nets higher ratings for the professor -- is not necessarily what ought to be learned.

Having year-to-year records of evaluations in the files, nevertheless, provides the college administration with

data which it may use either for or against the teacher. That the administrators recognize this power is demonstrated by their reluctance to be evaluated in turn by the teachers. Albert Cousins and Joseph Rogus (1977) find they fear that such evaluations are a threat to what it pleases them to call the "administrative ethic."

Administrators' objections to being evaluated by college teachers are cataloged by Cousins and Rogus in this manner:

1. Can faculty judgment, be it individual or collective, be valid?

2. Can the results of the balloting or the written appraisals stand scrutiny by the students, the board, the public, and professional bodies?

3. Would not faculty evaluations of administrators be construed as confusing popularity with real worth?

4. Might now faculty evaluation of administrators complicate the recruitment of administrators and impede their upward mobility?

5. Would not faculty assessments of academic officials pose a threat to the Administrative Ethic?

6. Would not allowing the professoriate to judge their administrative components open the real possibility of extending what is in the final analysis management from "below" to the highest reaches of the university's organization chart?

The use of ratings as instruments of social control, anywhere in the university hierarchy, is an evident factor which has bearing on the social phenomena under discussion here.

Background

At this point it is fitting to review some of the reasons for the current practice of student evaluation of college teachers.

In the late Nineteenth Century the campus was largely the preserve of the wealthy; less than two percent of persons between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one attended any institution of higher learning (Leuchtenburg, 1979:49). By 1940 about fifteen percent of that age group went beyond high school. The GI Bill of Rights following World War II brought about dramatic changes. By 1960, enrollments had ballooned to 3.6 millions on U.S. campuses, and by 1970 five times as many Americans were on college campuses as in 1940. They comprise forty percent of the age group.

This new student body no longer represented the more affluent of our society, although many persons obviously continued to see the association between college education and wealth as a cause-effect relationship. The idea of a college education as an "entitlement" came into vogue. The very large numbers of young people of identical age and social condition gradually led to a new atmosphere in which the basic legitimacy of adult authority was increasingly called into question (Reisman, 1969:30). Student protests and demonstrations became widespread in the 1960s and 1970s, eventually reaching half of the colleges and universities in the United States. Joe Feagin (1982:211) notes that in every state there were demonstrations, with seventy to eighty

violent demonstrations and twenty-six protest movements in connection with a single student strike in 1970. They seemed to be acting in concert on what George Herbert Mead called the "constant demand to realize one's self in some sort of superiority over those about us" (1934:205).

Campus protest groups began to seize presidential offices, oust faculty members from their classrooms, and demand an instant end to such things as "worthless classes, dictatorial or incompetent professors, irrelevant course material," etc. (Whittington, 1983b).

In this heated atmosphere, the taxpayers also were becoming more resentful of the general tax burden and especially of the rising burden of higher education. They felt that they were being made fools of because they paid money for "subversive" faculties to educate the ungrateful young (Reisman, 1969:28).

Student pressure for control and public pressure for accountability led to the use of questionnaires by which students could report anonymously on their professors as a means of cleansing the campus of the incompetent and to "improve learning," as the SREB rationalized the process (1977). During the 1970s faculties were in full retreat, fulfilling Mark Rudd's hope that the students would take control of the university; the loss of faculty authority had become a reality (Cahn, 1981).

The Process Ritualized

The campus atmosphere in the mid-1980s is not turbulent nor rebellious. In the last decade a new seriousness has returned to colleges and universities and anxieties about

political affairs are not intensified by activists seeking to overthrow authority. Meanwhile, scholastic attention devoted to the student evaluation of college professors has demonstrated that such evaluations are not an integral part of the instructional process and do little to illuminate it. In 1971 Professor F.N. Kerlinger said that such evaluations cause instructor hostility and resentment, undermine professional autonomy, diminish professional motivation, and erode professional responsibility. In the decade since then, other and more vigorous objections have been raised -- such that even a modest list of references is unnecessary for citation at this point.

Why, then, do the evaluations continue?

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1967), among others, have noted that social conduct during a crisis situation may become associated with relief from the crisis. Continuing that activity becomes maintenance of reality and may become institutionalized as collective ritual. Weber said that ritual has corresponded to rules and regulations, and adherence to rules and regulations become ritual long after the original rationale may have been forgotten. Clifford Geertz found that the central rituals of religion actually are symbolic models, and their continual re-enactment tends to give participants a particular sense of the divine, a mood that all is well in a predictable continuity (1973:216).

Aristotle remarked on the "cathartic" value of ritual, especially in that it is not necessarily an expression of felt emotions, but a disciplined rehearsal of "right attitudes" (Langer, 1957). Student checklists of professorial attributes may be such a checklist of social consensus about the role under examination. A life that does not incorporate

some degree of ritual, of gesture and attitude, she says, has no mental anchorage. They are, as Durkheim said, means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically (Durkheim, 1915:432).

Perhaps the better understanding of ritual as it applies to the collegiate ceremony of anonymous missives is Erving Goffman, who finds ritual conduct essential to the self-regulation of any society's members (1967:44). To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it as a ceremony -- as an expressive reaffirmation of the moral values of the community (1959:35). An annual salute to all that we hold dear about the student-teacher relationship, whether or not our notions are enlightened by evidence, seems not amiss when seen in such a light.

Enforcing Factors

For a recurring social event to continue even after its original purposes have been substantially diminished, there must be reinforcing factors fueling the phenomena. There are several such factors nourishing the ritual of student evaluations of college faculty:

1. There is a psychic payoff for almost all parties concerned, all rather well concealed behind the stated rationales.

a. The practice gives the students (who are the university's product in process, not its underwriter), a sense of having some degree of control over their lives. The university has announced that the practice is for good and noble purposes, and under this righteous cloak the disap-

pointed or disgruntled student can conceal his or her poison pen and with impunity "get even" with professors who may have forced inconvenient facts upon them.

b. The administration, in a practice encouraged by the underwriting public in the name of accountibility for expenditures of huge sums of tax money, can maintain powerful dossiers with which to reward or punish, threaten or promise, conceal or reveal, and otherwise maintain social control over faculty.

c. Prestige scales used in sociological research usually show the role of "college professor" ranks high in social esteem. Professors represent a social stratum generally higher than those of their students' families. Most empirical scores and most gratuitous comments on rating forms are pleasing and flattering. Many instructors are willing to shrug off the usual smattering of snide remarks in order to bask in the more pleasant comments they receive -- a boost for the ego becomes another reward implicit in the calling. Yet, several studies carried out by Wilbert McKeachie and Yi-Guang Lin have shown that this method of collecting student opinion leads to little or no change in the quality of college teaching (Coser, et al., 1983).

2. A second dominant reason for retention of the ritual is the increasing bureaucratization of the educational system. When diverse career avenues began to open for American women in recent decades, they began to abandon the colleges of education. To fill this increasing void the vested interests of these institutions began to broaden their scope to include more emphasis on the production of educationists destined for roles as administrators rather than teachers. These new generations may have found themselves falling into bureaucratic

molds described frequently by Robert Merton: the same training and skills that make administrators precise and reliable in dealing with routine problems also make them inflexible in dealing with changing or extraordinary situations.

Merton taught sociologists that the price of predictability is often overconformity to bureaucratic regulations, and once student evaluation of professors has become an established policy, pursuing that policy might become more important than the reasons for the policy in the first place. What Merton called a displacement of goals has taken place: Obeying the regulations becomes an end in itself. Slavish obedience to established policy regulations and obsessive concern with forms and procedures are the symptons of bureaucratic ritualism (Merton, 1940).

3. Student evaluation of professors has become a career calling for some educationists, and on several campuses there are "institutes" or "centers" based on this new specialty among educationists. It has become a business on some campuses, and on others there are established professional groups whose livelihoods depend on the administration and evaluation of evaluations. For the "staff development specialist" there is job security in student evaluation of instructors, for half the faculty always falls below the median and thus is in need of their expert attention.

Conclusions

The way in which student ratings are now used is counterproductive, argues Alexander Astin (1982). If institutions feel that student ratings of teaching must be made public or used in personnel actions, he offers a simple solution: have two sets of ratings, one for the record and

one for the private viewing of the professor.

Or, A.E. Bestor has argued elsewhere (1953), we should turn our attention to evaluating the process more than the individual professor. If colleges are doing their job, we should be able to point to significant and indisputable achievements in raising the intellectual level of the nation -- measured by larger per capita circulation of books and serious literature, by improved taste in our mass entertainment, by loftier standards of political debate, and by increased respect for First Amendment freedoms.

The literature on the sociology of ritual, juxtaposed on this current practice in American higher education, would suggest that Bestor's evidence probably cannot be expected in the proximate future.

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